

MADONNA - *CONFESSIONS TOUR* - PERFORMANCE REVIEW

MADISON SQUARE GARDEN: JUNE 29, 2006

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The Dancing Queen returns to the city where it all began, and this time around it's all about disco, dance fever, leotards, and the occasional Jesus pose.

Who else but Madonna could pull it off?

"Do you mind if I lay down for a few minutes?" the 47-year-old woman asked as she collapsed on the stage, understandably exhausted after thrashing wildly about to a thumping, bass-heavy, dance-driven track. The crowd roared as she got slowly to her feet. "Every time I do a show, I die a little bit," she gasped. "But no shit is worth doing unless you're willing to die for it," she concludes, "You New Yorkers know that!" The crowd showers her with wild applause and screaming.

This is Madonna, halfway through her current *Confessions Tour* on one of six sold-out nights at Madison Square Garden (she's set to return in mid-July). It's a rare moment of candor in the midst of the precise and exactly-choreographed spectacle we've come to expect from a Madonna concert, and a startling reminder that the power-horse dynamo who can command an entire stadium filled with people (and get the establishment to turn off the air-conditioner for her voice) is still just a petite mother of two.

Opening with an Equestrian theme, horses play a big part at the start of the show, and are an apt metaphor for this work-horse of a lady. Her love of all things equine, including English riding gear with a decidedly dominatrix slant, finds an unlikely complement in the retro-electro-dance-pop she's been dabbling in of late. "***Future Lovers***", with a delicious segue into Donna Summers' "***I Feel Love***", doesn't sound like a natural companion to horses and saddles, but somehow she makes it work. (Madonna channeling Ms. Summers' breakout dance smash is worth the hefty price of admission alone.)

Power, domination, control, and tightly-harnessed energy form the underlying themes of this opening set-piece, but when she starts gleefully spinning around the stage for her latest single "**Get Together**", it's clear that this show is all about fun, and the joyful, transcendent exuberance of a decent pop song. By the time she climbs onto a carousel saddle and performs a sexy pole dance while crooning "**Like A Virgin**", the audience is in her leather-gloved hand. Closing out the first segment with the infectious "**Jump**" from her latest album, Madonna has drawn us into a dizzying world where disco meets the divine and redemption can be found on the dance floor. As parkour-inspired choreography is executed to a fading beat, the lights dim and the disco recedes for a moment.

The evening's controversial centerpiece comes slowly into view as a "discofied" cross, covered garishly like a mirror ball, rises from the floor, with Madonna splayed Jesus-like in a crucifixion pose and donning a crown of thorns. An organ intro leads into "**Live To Tell**", the most moving ballad she's ever recorded, and as she looks heavenward she delivers a dramatic and compelling version of the 20-year-old song. So powerful is the image that the message displayed on the screens is at best muddled (something about kids orphaned by AIDS in Africa), but such befuddlement has always been Madonna's stock in trade, and she's still not apologizing for it.

"**Forbidden Love**" is her most blatant homage to gay men this evening, as two male dancers perform an intimate, intricate dance with only their arms, ending in a warm embrace. The "message" segment of the show continues as a cage is lowered and a woman shrouded in a figure-hiding Muslim outfit makes desperate motions to escape. To the driving beat of "**Isaac**" Madonna takes the heavy folds of clothing from her and reveals a beautiful woman, now free and dancing with glorious vitality. One of the night's strongest performances, "**Sorry**", furthers the female empowerment theme. She and her girls tear up the stage before finally taking down the guys in a West-Side-Story-like showdown of boys vs. girls.

The political punches of her last tour have been reduced to a single interlude here - less-pointed than her *American Life* politics, but far more potent. A barrage of well-known dictators (and she's including George Bush and Tony Blair) appears as her disembodied voice

commands, "Don't talk," and "Don't speak." There's nothing overt about it, and such a sly criticism of the current state of the world speaks volumes as to how far Madonna has grown in terms of sending political messages. The segment ends with a simple statement: "The audience is listening." Indeed we are, and when she re-appears for the sleek glam-rock part of the show we're ready to hear more.

In the city that started it all, "***I Love New York***" is received warmly enough. Though far from a stellar track on the *Confessions* album, the live version – all guitar and pumping bass – sets Madonna, and the crowd, on fire. A rocking version of "***Ray of Light***" keeps the audience pumped up while "***Let It Will Be***" finds her frenetically dancing down the catwalk, trouncing about riotously on her knees, and losing herself with reckless abandon.

It is here when she makes the opening confession, lying down at the end of the stage and sipping from her bottle of water. She had gotten just three and a half hours of sleep the previous evening, but she said the energy and love she felt from the crowd was contagious. There's a breather for both Madonna and the crowd as she launches into two ballads – "***Drowned World/Substitute for Love***" and "***Paradise (Not For Me)***". For the latter, she gently strums an acoustic guitar as images of falling cherry blossoms glow behind her. It's the last quiet moment of the evening, and though somewhat incongruous with the non-stop beat of the show, it offers a peek into the acoustic performer that's been missing from her recent work. Of course, the dance floor is where it all began, and the last portion of the show celebrates just that.

From here on out it's an incendiary disco throw-down, starting with Madonna's brilliant *Saturday Night Fever* recreation, replete with white pant suit, butterfly collar, and moves that would make John Travolta proud. It's a gleefully tongue-in-cheek moment, and all of Madison Square Garden is up and grooving as she melds "***Disco Inferno***" with her own "***Music***" in a combination of perfect pop alchemy. It's rare that an icon can so successfully spoof another, while simultaneously celebrating and reveling in their own stardom, but that's where Madonna's genius lies. A veritable mirror-ball of pop culture – reflecting and refracting images and making them her own – Madonna is at her best when performing such showbiz sleights of

hand before a live audience. After break-neck dance versions of "*Erotica*", "*La Isla Bonita*", and "*Lucky Star*", the show ends with a sing-a-long to "*Hung Up*" and its anthemic mantra, "Time goes by so slowly." Tonight that is a delicious paradox, as the two-and-a-half-hour show seems to have flown by, leaving the audience, as always, wanting more.

The *Confessions Tour*, with its clever-but-not-quite-ironic references to disco, Abba, Travolta, and even Madonna's own early dance hits, is all about having fun and finding escape as the world turns ever darker. The Dancing Queen still reigns supreme, and 23 years into her remarkable career she remains as relevant and transfixing as ever, putting on a stellar show as further evidence of her brilliance.